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ABSTRACT

For Asian Americans, learning only the skills of verbal communication is not sufficient--they need to develop a sense of appreciation for eloquence, to understand the urgency of freedom of expression in a democratic society, and to internalize the value of speech as an instrument for self-enhancement. The remarkable differences between the East Asian cultures of China and Japan and the American culture make acculturation of East Asians into the mainstream of United States society extremely difficult. Characteristics of individualistic cultures include: the individual as an autonomous entity; egalitarianism; competitiveness; and self-reliance. Characteristics of collective cultures include: individuals as interdependent entities; hierarchism; cooperativeness; and self-denial. Looked at positively, the experience of individualism, prominent in the American culture, espouses rights for personal freedom and enhancement, endorses the dignity and entitlement of ordinary persons before God, the law, and with other citizens. The long history of the East Asian cultures testifies to the merits of collectivism. The general attitude of East Asian people is toward language and verbalization involving fewer words, supported by the aesthetics of vagueness. In the western tradition, the importance of eloquence has been persistently emphasized ever since the days of Plato and Aristotle. Teaching and clarification of values as part of the curriculum is important for cultivating appreciation and sense of purpose in all the skills taught in speech communication. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF INDIVIDUALISTIC AND COLLECTIVE CULTURES: A VALUE BASED COMPARISON

by

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Teaching Speech in an university has enabled me to attract a great deal of undue attention and praise in my Asian social circle. Most of my friends and associates have reacted to my career choice with astonishment, "how can you do such a thing!" "this is so unusual," and as the initial shock wore off, they frequently would add, "you know we are traditionally not good at this." A survey at a rural university campus in the U.S. echoed the sentiment, "the Oriental are intelligent, hard working, goal-directed, but ironically incompetent in communication." My observation has indicated that the Asian American community is beginning to recognize the importance of eloquence for survival and advancement in the American society. In an article entitled, "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman," Mitsuye Yamada, an English teacher in a American community college stated, "... we need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us, "this is so uncharacteristic of you." It is believed that even though the Asian students in high schools scored the highest in SAT, and Asians have been stereotyped as model workers in many organizations, the passive nature of our communication behavior is a stumbling block for leadership and career advancement in the American society. To find a solution to the problem, we need to look into the root of our culture heritage, to search for the different assumptions in the two cultures that we have involved ourselves in. The purpose of this paper is to present a comparison of the cultural founda-

tions, value systems, and the nature and function of eloquence in the two cultures in question, in an effort to provide a better understanding of the complexities of cultural influence on the patterns of communication.

THE INDIVIDUALISM-COLLECTIVISM DICHOTOMY

One of the major dimensions of cultural variation is individualism and collectivism. It is believed to be essential for understanding of culture values. Individualism, prevalent in the U. S. culture, is characterized by individuals subordinating the goals the collective to their personal goals. A key belief of people in individualistic cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the individual. When goals of the collective and the personal goals are in conflict, the individual is free to leave the collective and search for a new collective which is more compatible with their personal goals. Collectives exist for the purpose of maximizing individual's well being and advancement. Collectivism, dominant in the East Asian cultures of Japan and China, is characterized by individuals subordinating their personal goals to the goals of the collectives they belong to. A key belief of people in the collective cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the collective. When personal goals and the goals of the collective are in conflict, it is the duty of the individual to suppress their personal goals in favor of the goals of the collective. Individuals exist for the purpose of serving the ever-lasting existence and well being of the

collective.

Characteristics of Individualistic Cultures

(1) The Individuals as Autonomous Entities: The attachment between individuals and the collective is very mild. They are many types of collectives to which the individual may be attached. The essential attributes of the individual person are the individual's own beliefs, attitudes, principles, or points of view, rather than the collective memberships. The individual joins and leaves a collective based solely on the costs and benefits assessment. Loyalty is not a compelling virtue. Relationships fluctuate in the constant flux of joining and leaving one collective after the other.

(2) Egalitarianism: In the individualistic culture, people are more comfortable in horizontal relationships and are ambivalent about people in authority or people in vertical relationships. Efforts are constantly made to erase status markers to create atmosphere of equality. For example, many bosses pitch in mundane office activities, inquire about subordinates's physical mental well-being, and prefer to be called by their first names, etc...

(3) Competitiveness: In the individualistic culture, competition is acceptable at all levels, though in many situations competition with co-workers is masked. It is believed that competition is essential for an individual to achieve their personal goals.

(4) Self-Reliance: In the individualistic culture, self-

reliance is associated with independence and the opportunity to do one's own thing. Personal gratification result from knowing they have achieved success and have withstood tough challenges without relying on others.

Characteristics of Collective Cultures

(1) Individuals As Interdependent Entities: In the collective culture, individuals are firmly attached with the collective. They are valued only when they can contribute to the collective in some way. Since an individual has to depend the collective for survival and recognition, they are to be consistently aware of their appropriate place and behavior among other fellow individuals in the same collective. Individuality is suppressed instead of encouraged. Duties and obligation comes first, they are to be selfless, to think of the collective in which they are members. A good student studies hard for the parents, the family, not for themselves. A person marries to have children for carrying on the blood string of the ancestry, not for love and companionship. A good son and daughter obeys. A superior in command is responsible for the well-being of the whole entity in which he/she is in charge. "Us" is the center of importance, not "me." The ideal is to have a society which is composed of a group of dutiful individuals who know their appropriate positions and work harmoniously together for the everlasting existence of the collective in countless years to come.

(2) Hierarchism: In the collective culture, people are most positive toward vertical relationships, they are quite comfort-

able in accepting power difference. Confucius, the master of the East Asian cultures, conceived human relationships only in hierarchical terms. According to Confucius, the five-fold human relationships are: the heaven and the earth, the emperor and his subjects; the father and his son; the husband and his wife; and the elder brother and his younger brother. The former are superiors, and latter are inferiors. The superiors cares for the inferiors, and the inferiors obey. Status differences are deliberately pronounced. It is offensive to call the bosses by their first names. The superiors and inferiors keep proper distance between them by minimizing interactions. In collective culture, status is defined by ascription--age, sex, family connections, as well as achievements.

(3) Cooperativeness: People in the collective culture are obligated to appear non-threatening to others. Competition between ingroup members are prohibited or at least frowned upon. Members of the same collective cooperate diligently for the their common good. However, competition between different collectives are the norm. People generally are indifferent, if not hostile toward outgroup members.

(4) Self-Denial: In the collective culture, self-reliance has meaning only when it aims at not burdening others in the same collective. Self-Denial is much more appropriate. Since child-hood, one has been taught to listen, to tolerate, to obey, and to have no personal ambition. Tolerance, modesty, moderation, are necessary for successful social navigation. People in the

collective culture are more aware of their dependence on the significant others in relationships. "Doing your own thing" is frequently interpreted as disregard for others, and therefore, it is to be discouraged. Fear of criticism from other ingroup members is very powerful in preventing people from seeking gratification solely for personal reasons.

PERSONAL VIRTUES IN INDIVIDUALISTIC AND COLLECTIVIST CULTURES

Looked at positively, the experience of individualism, prominent in the American culture, has espoused rights for personal freedom and enhancement. It endorses the dignity and entitlement of ordinary persons before God, the law, and with other citizens. The emphasis on the self-expression of some Americans testifies to an increased regard for personal enhancement and fulfillment. For example, the saying, "squeaky wheel gets the grease," illustrated it perfectly. In America, Children are socialized to become independent, to assume responsibility for their own actions, to be able to verbalize their demands on others, and to exercise self-control over their actions. Throughout this process the desirability of "becoming independent " is explicitly raised.. The rhetorical belief in independence acts to conceal the complex interdependencies in family and social relationships. Children, adolescents, the young adults feel the need to act as if (and to believe) they are in control, and to disregard dependent aspects of their relationship to parents,

teachers, employers, and other superiors. A good person is one who is confident and sure of him/herself, goal directed--knows what he/she want, responsible (for his own actions), and inevitably a good communicator. Good communication skills are essential for personal enhancement. They are supposed to be straight forward, energetic, not shy, easy to talk to, nice to all people, and always know what to say.

The long history of the East Asian cultures testifies to the merits of collectivism. In order to assure group cohesiveness and solidarity, the individuals are taught to conform and submit. Self-expression is discouraged. Communication serves only to promote group harmony not for self expression. "The nail which sticks out the farthest takes the most pounding," a famous Japanese proverb illustrates the treatment of individuals claiming individuality. The ideal of conformity and self-repression has significant consequences on the communicative behavior and social etiquette of the people. In Japan, Overt displays of egoism and accentuation of individualism are interpreted as being aggressive and are permitted only under specific situations, e. g. during unusual stresses, or as a result of unbearable provocation. Naturally, a self of this nature is not highly assertive, but seeks to accommodate others and in return receives enduring social support. Modesty and reserve are insisted upon as guidelines of appropriateness in self-expression.

VARIATIONS IN ATTITUDES TOWARD ELOQUENCE

The East Asians prefer people who are demure, and quiet. One Chinese proverb states, "diseases come in from the mouth, and the trouble comes out from the mouth." The Japanese share the same negative sentiment, "out of the mouth comes all evil." The children are instructed to be quiet around the adults by the saying, " a child has ears only, no mouth." Listening is more important than speaking in the society. In contrast to the significance of eloquence and self assertion, the general attitude of people toward language and verbalization is fewer word, supported by the aesthetics of vagueness, are better than more words.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, the three major shaping forces in the East Asian cultures, reinforced the same philosophy. Confucius, the chief educator for centuries was always contemptuous of eloquence and of ornate language. To him, "ornate words and pleasing manners are seldom related to virtues." Confucius envisaged the superior man, some one who is properly cultivated in virtues and righteousness, speaking:

> The superior man is diligent in duty but slow to speak.
>
> The superior is slow to speak but quick to act.
>
> In antiquity (the ideal time), men were loathe to speak.
>
> The superior man acts before speaking and speaks according to his action.
>
> Immodest statements are hard to live up to.
>
> A superior man is ashamed of his words out stripping his deeds.

In short, a good person and a skillful communicator are adversary in nature. One can only be one or the other, but not both.

Being fully aware of the limitation of language to the fullness of experience, the Taoist scholars shared the similar distrust toward eloquence. The classic text of Taoism, Tao-te Ching, advocated:

> The greatest skill seems clumsy and the greatest eloquence stutters.
>
> He who knows doesn't talk; he who talks does not know.
>
> keep your mouth shut.

Jen (Ch'an in Chinese) Buddhism persistently opposed to words, and then to the intellect which deals exclusively in words. It agreed with the taoist notions that fundamental principles are inexpressible in language." In Zen, truth is thought to be intuitively gained only through silent meditation and incommunicable through language.

In the western tradition, the importance of eloquence has been persistently emphasized ever since the days of Plato and Aristotle. Argumentation and reasoning are the necessary path for obtaining the truth. In the U. S. society, freedom of speech is essential to the preservation of democracy. It is believed to be the right and the duty of citizens to become trained in eloquence. Eloquence is an important qualities of the statesmen and ordinary people. In everyday life, communication competence is viewed as an essential characteristic of a good person. It is one of the most important criteria in their selection of leaders, negotiators, job applicants, associates, and even friends.

Awkwardness in speech is equated with stupidity and deficiency. "If you can not explain it, you don't know it." To be active and enthusiastic, to be involved, to be confident, to be out going, and to be articulate are essential skills in everyday endeavors. Eloquence is essential to personal survival and personal enhancement.

CONCLUSION

The remarkable differences between the East Asian culture and the American culture make acculturation of East Asian Americans into the mainstream of the U.S. society extremely difficult. For an Asian American, learning only the skills of communication is not sufficient for them. They need to develop a sense of appreciation for eloquence, to understand the urgency of freedom of expression in a democratic society, and to internalize the value of speech as an instrument for self-enhancement. Equality and independence, the two most values of the American society need to be stressed instead of being taken for granted. Teaching and clarification of values as part of the curriculum is important for cultivating appreciation and sense of purpose in all the skills we are teaching in the field of speech communication.

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